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Vermont delegation tries to improve Patriot Act

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WASHINGTON -- With just a few weeks left before the nation's most sweeping anti-terrorism law expires, Sen. Patrick Leahy is trying to negotiate stronger privacy protections.

Vermont's senior senator, who played a key role in crafting the original Patriot Act, is trying to make federal law enforcement officials give more justification before they can investigate a person's reading habits, medical records or credit reports.

He wants federal agents to have to tell people sooner when they have used a "sneak and peek" warrant to search their home or office without informing them in advance. Leahy also wants federal officials to have to report publicly on how often they are using these new tools.

When the bill was passed shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Leahy pushed to require that some of the more controversial provisions come up for review in four years.

Now, he and Rep. Bernie Sanders and Sen. Jim Jeffords, both independents, want to make sure the most contentious parts of the law will expire again in four years so Congress will have to take another close look.

The Bush administration and House leaders favor allowing the law to be renewed for seven more years before a small portion of it expires again.

As the senior Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Leahy worked with chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., to keep the House and the Bush administration from pushing through a new Patriot Act without what he considered adequate safeguards. Their opposition derailed the new bill from being passed before Thanksgiving.

"I got a dozen or more Republicans to go to the leadership to say they would join me in blocking (the Patriot Act renewal) until it had more checks and balances," said Leahy, who hopes that coalition will hold to pass a revised law by year's end.

The Bush administration and House leaders are resisting significant changes to the law, which they say has worked well and made the country safer without any proven abuse of civil rights.

"This is no time to let our guard down, and no time to roll back good laws," Bush said in a speech earlier this year. "The Patriot Act is expected to expire, but the terrorist threats will not expire."

Sanders, who voted against the original Patriot Act, said there is 100-percent agreement on the need to fight terrorism and protect Americans.

"But we can effectively fight terrorism without undermining the constitutional rights that make us a

free country," said Sanders, who has led a House fight against letting federal officials pry into people's reading habits.

Jeffords agreed.

"We must strike the proper balance between increased security and protecting civil liberties," Jeffords said.

Vermonters have been keenly interested in the law, with Vermont librarians leading the charge against a portion of the law that forces librarians and book sellers to turn over the reading records of their customers to federal agents who request them for terrorist investigations.